Opening Statement

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Ranking Member
House Committee on Homeland Security
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DHS Authorization Bill Mark-Up

Today represents an important moment in this Committee's history. We are marking up our first Department of Homeland Security authorization bill as a standing Committee.

I thank Chairman Cox for his leadership on this matter and for taking the initiative to undertake this process.

That said, I wish that the base legislation before us would have been more comprehensive. We needed a bill that addressed all the glaring gaps in homeland security, as well as the deficiencies our oversight has uncovered at the Department.

I know that there is a sense that the Committee must be careful as it proceeds on its maiden voyage, so as to not upset the leaders of other Committees. I ask everyone here in this room – Republican and Democrat – to put aside petty jurisdictional squabbles and stand together to secure America.

The welfare of our nation and its citizens are of far greater importance than accommodating a Member who lays claim to jurisdiction on any of these issues.

What we do here today will help set the course for where the Department is headed over the next year. I hope we will do what is right.

As we go through this process today and possibly tomorrow, there are homeland security priorities that are critical and must be addressed if we are to protect our nation.

First, I think we need to make sure the Department has its act together internally. If the Department's Inspector General and Privacy Offices are weak and its staff lacks basic employee protections, then the agency is destined to fail or be mediocre at best. In addition, if it can't get its own computer networks to talk to one another, how can it possibly help our first responders talk to one another in a time of crisis?

Speaking of first responders, they need interoperable communications so they can talk to each other in the event of an emergency. We need to make sure that the first on the scene have the tools they need to protect not only our nation, but themselves.

We must be prepared to prevent a biological attack. Our government cannot wait for our enemies to use anthrax or small pox on our residents before taking preventive measures, as well as preparing our healthcare infrastructure to respond.

We must also protect our food supply from attack – from field to fork. I come from a state largely dependent on agriculture. Approximately 80 percent of the nation's catfish supply comes from Mississippi. I know very well what the devastation to our agricultural businesses would be as well as the impact on consumers if our food supply was a subject of sabotage.

We must also do everything we can to prevent a terrorist attack by strengthening our borders – whether on land, sea, or in the air.

At the same time, we must secure our ports and coastlines.

Something that I know is close to my colleague from D.C., Ms. Holmes Norton, is the security of our trains and buses. We know that we cannot protect every city bus or subway car, but we can at least address the needless security gaps that leave them vulnerable, as well as increase public awareness.

We must secure chemical plants, nuclear plants, and other critical infrastructure. We cannot remain in the dark about what critical infrastructure we have and what we must do to protect it. I know the terrorists are not going to wait for us to figure this out before they attack.

We need to make protecting cyberspace a priority. The President has failed to provide clear leadership on who would be in charge in the event of a cyber-catastrophe. Global networks have made it possible to bring down airports, dams, and other critical infrastructures from anywhere with a laptop. We need to do more.

We must use technology to optimize our ability to find terrorists, utilize biometric identifiers, and process new arrivals in our nation.

We also cannot forget which weapon the terrorists used against us on 9-11. We must secure our airplanes and airports. We cannot allow TSA and the Department continue to drag their feet on this front.

I look forward today to addressing all these issues. Again, I hope we can all agree to address these issues. As elected officials, we have a responsibility to do all we can to secure America.